

VERBAL CONFESSION OF CHRIST

(by George Battey)

Until recently most of our brethren agreed that a verbal confession of faith in Christ was a necessary step of salvation. Also, until just very recently, the kind of confession that should be made was widely agreed upon. But times are changing and even the most fundamental doctrines of salvation, like verbal confession, have been questioned and attacked.

Two vital questions have been posed and they are valid questions that deserve answers: (1) Does the Bible require a verbal confession of faith in Christ in order for the alien sinner to be saved and, if so, (2) What does that confession consist of?

The scriptures commonly used in times past to prove the necessity of verbal confession are one by one being attacked and eliminated. For example, Matthew 10:32-33 has commonly been used to prove the necessity of verbal confession, but this passage cannot be used to prove the point, we are told, because that passage encompasses more than a one time verbal confession; rather it envisions a confession lasting throughout one's entire Christian life. Acts 8:37 has also in times past been used to prove the necessity of verbal confession, but this too is now rejected as being a spurious text that does not even belong in the Bible. The NIV, NRSV, RSV, and ASV relegate the verse to a mere footnote although acknowledging that some manuscripts include the verse.

If we can ever agree that verbal confession is even necessary, the next question is: What shall the confession consist of? Commonly our brethren would appeal to the confession made by the eunuch, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37), but as mentioned above, that passage has been eliminated from the discussion. In place of this standard confession comes a relatively new confession based on the NIV rendering of Romans 10:9, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Thus, some are now taking confessions which consist of, "I believe that Jesus is Lord." The difference between these two confessions is significant because confessing that Jesus is Lord is not the same thing as confessing that He is the Son of God.

IS A VERBAL CONFESSION NECESSARY?

Beginning, then, with the first question at hand: Is a verbal confession of faith in Christ a necessary step in the conversion process for the alien sinner? The scriptures

indicate yes. Jesus taught repeatedly that faith in Him was necessary for salvation.¹ Moreover, before one can be baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38), he must believe first. Jesus plainly said in Mark 16:16, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” It is sinful to baptize someone who does not believe in Jesus.

But the next most logical question is: What is it about Jesus that must be believed? Concerning John the baptizer, Jesus taught that men should believe that he was “more than a prophet” (Mt 11:9-11). If Jesus said this about John, how much more could it be said about Jesus Himself? Jesus is “more than a prophet” and men must believe this to be saved. But how much more than a prophet was He and how much more must be believed about Him before one can be baptized and be saved? To the Jews Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM” (Jn 8:58). The name “I AM” was the name of God Himself (Ex 3:14) and when Jesus said this it was obvious that He was claiming equality with God. The Jews understood exactly what He meant and immediately took up stones to kill Him (Jn 8:59). The point is, Jesus required that men believe in His deity. Very pointedly Jesus said to the Jews, “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (Jn 8:24). The word “He” in this passage has been added. Literally, the Greek NT reads, “If you do not believe that I AM, you shall die in the sins of you.” In other words, men must believe that Jesus is the divine Son of God and unless they believe this they are not fit candidates for baptism and salvation. Thus, the thing which must be believed is the deity of Christ.

But how shall we know if sinners believe in the deity of Christ in order that we might then baptize them for the remission of sins? It is impossible to read their minds for “what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” (1 Cor 2:11). The answer to this rhetorical question is obviously, “No one”; no one is able to know what a man is thinking within his spirit. First Corinthians chapter 2 uses this to teach a point about divine revelation. We cannot know either what a man is thinking or what God is thinking unless it is revealed to us. A revelation is needed, in either case, to know what someone is thinking. Therefore, in regards to salvation, the alien sinner must reveal to us that he believes in the deity of Christ before we may baptize him into Christ.

The revealing process, wherein an alien sinner makes known his faith in Jesus’ deity, is called “confession” and as pointed out above, it is a necessary prerequisite to baptism. “Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven” (Mt 10:32-33). Despite all efforts to remove this passage from the discussion, this scripture remains in the discussion. Whether at the beginning, middle, or end of one’s spiritual life, he must be willing to verbally confess his faith in Christ as the Son of God and if at any time one refuses to do so, his salvation is forfeited. While this passage may envision a lifetime of confession, it at least embraces the initial confession made before baptism. Again, the apostles wrote concerning verbal confession.² Most notable is the passage written by John, “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 Jn 4:15). In

¹ To list a few instances, consider the following passages: Lk. 8:12; Jn 1:12; 3:15-18,36; 5:24; 6:29,35,40,47; 7:38; 8:24; 11:25-26,40; 12:36,46; 14:1,11; 16:9; 20:31.

² Rom 10:9-10; 1 Tim 6:12-13.

keeping with what Jesus said in Mark 16:16, that belief was necessary before baptism could occur, we read the confession of the eunuch, “Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?’ Then Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God’” (Acts 8:36-37).³

So, in answer to the first major question, Is verbal confession of faith in Christ a necessary step in the conversion process for the alien sinner?, the answer is yes, a verbal confession is absolutely necessary.

WHAT SHOULD THE CONFESSION CONSIST OF?

The next question revolves around exactly what the verbal confession of an alien sinner should consist of. Commonly our brethren have required that sinners confess their faith in Christ as the Son of God, but a new generation of preachers has arisen to take issue with this. Because of the rise in popularity of the NIV translation among our brethren, some among us now argue that the verbal confession should consist of, “Jesus is Lord,” based on the NIV’s translation of Romans 10:9.⁴ This translation is different and at odds with the KJV and NKJV which render the passage, “Confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus.” There is a significant difference between these two translations. The NIV rendition is saying that men should confess that Jesus is “Master” and that He should be submitted to in obedience. The KJV rendition is saying that men should confess the deity of Jesus and this is not the same as confessing that Jesus is “Master.” Sarah confessed that her husband Abraham was “lord,” implying that she should submit to and obey him (1 Pet 3:6), but she was not confessing that Abraham was divine. The sons of Jacob confessed that Joseph was “lord of the land” (Gen 42:30), but they were not confessing he was divine. The apostle Paul called slave owners “masters”⁵ (Eph 6:9; Col. 4:1), but he was not implying they were divine. To the man born blind Jesus asked, “Do you believe in the Son of God? He answered and said, ‘Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you’” (Jn 9:35-37). Notice carefully that the blind man confessed Jesus as “Lord,” but this was not enough. Jesus required that he also confess Him as the “Son of God.” You will find the same thing in the case of Martha. In John 11:21 she confessed freely that Jesus was “Lord.” But, as in the case with the blind man, this was not enough to satisfy Jesus. She must also confess that He is the “Son of God.” Therefore Jesus said to her, “Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?” She

³ More on this passage later.

⁴ The NIV is not alone in rendering Rom 10:9 in this way. Other translations which follow suit include the RSV, NRSV, ASV, and the NASV.

⁵ “Masters” in this passage is from the same Greek word kurios which is translated in other passages as “Lord.”

said to Him, `Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world” (Jn 11:26-27).

While it is true that men must confess Jesus as being Lord of all (Phil 2:11), this is not the same as confessing Jesus as the Son of God. To confess Jesus as the divine Son of God is a greater confession than to say He is Lord. If men confess that Jesus is Lord, they are making a worthy admission that He deserves to be submitted to and obeyed, but if nothing more is confessed, they are saying no more than Sarah said about Abraham. In contrast, to confess Jesus as the divine Son of God is to admit that He is divine, equal with God, and therefore is Lord and should be submitted to and obeyed. In other words, to confess that Jesus is the Son of God encompasses the idea that He is Lord, but this does not work the other way around. To simply confess He is Lord does not necessarily imply that one believes Him to be divine. A “Jehovah’s Witness” would be willing to confess, “Jesus is Lord,” and therefore should be obeyed. But they would not be willing to confess that Jesus is the divine Son of God, equal with God, and therefore Lord. Jesus is Lord because He is first the divine Son of God (cf. Heb. 1).

THE NIV RENDITION OF ROMANS 10:9

Is the NIV rendition of Romans 10:9 valid? Is its manuscript basis the most reliable available? To answer this authoritatively would require someone more trained in ancient manuscripts than myself, but with the information available to me, and provided I am interpreting this information correctly, it does not appear that the text used by the NIV in this passage is the best available.

The NIV OT is based upon the standard Masoretic Hebrew text, but the NT is built upon an eclectic text - a fluid text taking what the translation committees thought to be the best parts of all available manuscripts. In the case of Romans 10:9 there were two major variant readings to choose from. The United Bible Society (UBS) 3rd edition opted for the first variant which agrees with the Received Text and is translated, “confess with the mouth of you (the) Lord Jesus.” This is based upon rather impressive textual authority including the Sinaiticus, the Bezae, and other manuscripts ranging from the third century all the way to the year 1561. In total, twenty-six Greek manuscripts, fourteen Greek and Latin lectionaries, and the writings of six “early church fathers” are cited in the footnotes to support this reading. Three more manuscripts add the word “Christ” after the name “Lord Jesus.” However, the NIV did not choose to use this reading. Instead, the translation committee chose the second variation which, when translated is rendered, “Confess with the mouth of you, `Jesus (is) Lord.” This is supported by only one manuscript dated in the year 1044, one Greek lectionary dated from the fourth to seventh centuries, and three “early church fathers.” A variation, “Confess the word with the mouth of you `Jesus (is) Lord,” is found in one ancient manuscript (the prestigious Vaticanus of the fourth century), one Greek lectionary, and three “early church fathers” all ranging from the third to the fifth centuries.

It would appear, then, if the footnotes of the UBS 3rd edition are accurate and up-to-date, and if I am interpreting the data correctly, the most well founded text was rejected by the NIV committee and the weaker, more feeble text was adopted. Interestingly, there is more textual support and just as impressive support ⁶ for including Acts 8:37 than for the NIV rendering of Romans 10:9! In other words, the NIV rejected Acts 8:37 because the textual basis seemed weak to the translation committee, but in Romans 10:9 they chose to include a variant reading founded on a weaker basis! To make matters worse, the NIV does not even footnote the fact that the larger majority and oldest manuscripts have, “confess the Lord Jesus.” This is not an NIV bashing campaign, but it is truly a weakness in an otherwise and overall good modern translation.

In the case of Romans 10:9 it would seem that the Greek text and translation of the KJV and NKJV is superior to the NIV and other modern translations. Again, let me emphasize that I am not bashing the overall integrity of the NIV, nor am I implying the KJV and NKJV have no textual or translation problems of their own for they certainly do. I am merely saying, that if the data I am looking at is correct and current, and if I am interpreting that data accurately, the KJV and NKJV have the upper hand in transmitting and translating Romans 10:9. The scriptures, in this case, are undoubtedly teaching men that they must confess the Lord Jesus Christ. That is, Romans 10:9 is not giving a verbatim confession that must be repeated, but rather the passage is identifying the One who must be confessed - the Lord Jesus Christ.

WHAT MUST BE CONFESSED?

This brings us back to our original question, What must the confession of Christ consist of? Romans 10:9 identifies the One who must be confessed, but what must be confessed about Him?

During the ministry of Jesus, on several occasions, demons would “confess” Him before men, but He would promptly rebuke them and not allow them to continue confessing Him. One example will suffice to illustrate: “And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out, saying, ‘You are the Son of God.’ But He sternly warned them that they should not make Him known” (Mk 3:11-12). Jesus did not tolerate such a confession from the demons because (1) it would not alter their destiny, and (2) he did not want anyone to conclude He was in league with demons.

Over and over again men confessed the deity of Jesus by confessing He was the Son of God. By making such a confession they were at the same time acknowledging Him as a Lord or Master who was worthy of ruling over their lives. The disciples said, “Truly You are the Son of God” (Mt 14:33). Nathaniel confessed, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (Jn 1:49). Caiaphas and the other Jewish leaders were not interested if some viewed Jesus as a master, or lord, but they would not tolerate anyone confessing Him as the Son of God because that implied deity (Mt 26:63-64; Jn 12:42). Neither would they allow men to confess Him as the “Christ” (Greek for

⁶ Excepting the Vaticanus codEx

Messiah), because the Messiah was admittedly the Son of God (Ps 2:2-7). In response to this, Peter boldly preached Jesus as both Lord and Christ, that is, enthroned deity (Acts 2:36).

When God sent John the baptizer to prepare the way for Jesus, John made two confessions. First, “He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ’” (Jn 1:20). And second, “‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God’” (Jn 1:32-34).

This was not enough to satisfy our heavenly Father. He must Himself confess His own son. First, at the baptism of the Savior, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17). And again on the Mount of Transfiguration, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” (Mt 17:5). This made a lasting impression upon the three disciples who witnessed this great event. Years later Peter wrote of it, “For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’” (2 Pet 1:17).

Jesus confessed Himself on numerous occasions. During debate with unbelieving Jews He said, “‘I and My Father are one.’ Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, ‘Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone Me?’ The Jews answered Him, saying, ‘For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God.’ Jesus answered them, ‘Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, ‘You are gods’”? If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, “You are blaspheming,” because I said, “I am the Son of God”? If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him’” (Jn 10:30-38). Again, when on trial before Caiaphas, “The high priest answered and said to Him, ‘I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘It is as you said’” (Mt 26:63-64).

Over and over we read of men either confessing that Jesus is the Son of God, or else remembering that He confessed this about Himself. Mocking Jews at the cross remembered that Jesus confessed of Himself that He was the Son of God (Mt 26:43). The soldier standing at the foot of the cross when Jesus died said, “Truly this Man was the Son of God!” (Mk 15:39). Some might argue that this soldier was merely saying Jesus was “the son of a god” rather than “the Son of God.” But the objection is invalid because whatever the soldier meant, he certainly meant Jesus was deity. The very purpose for writing the gospel accounts was so that, “You may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (Jn 20:30-31). The first thing Paul preached after his conversion was “the Christ ... that He is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20). To the Romans Paul wrote “concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord ... declared to be the Son of God with power” (Rom 1:3-4). In other words, Jesus was proven to be more than just “Lord” by His resurrection; He was proven to be the Son of God! To Timothy Paul counseled, “Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life,

to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Tim 6:12). The “good confession” which Timothy made was that which Jesus Himself made before Pilate (1 Tim 6:13). That confession concerned the identity of Jesus as the Son of God (Jn 19:8-11) and the fact that He was a heavenly (divine) King rather than an earthly king (Jn 18:33-37). The Hebrew writer wrote of the Christian’s confession when he exhorted, “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession” (Heb. 4:14). John adds to the testimony when writing his epistle, “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 Jn 4:15).

The strongest evidence available that confession is both necessary and should concern Jesus’ Sonship toward God, not merely His Lordship toward believers, comes in Peter’s confession. Jesus was concerned as to what men were thinking of Him: “When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, ‘Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?’ So they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’” (Mat. 16:13-15). Jesus was not satisfied for men to view Him as a prophet, or lord only. Elijah, John the Baptist, and other prophets were also “masters” or “lords” with disciples that followed them. Jesus expected more in the confessions of men than this. The confession made by Peter satisfied Jesus because it embraced His deity as well as His Lordship. Peter confessed: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church’” (Mt 16:16-18). Two plausible explanations have been offered for this confession and Jesus’ response to Peter. The most common and widely know explanation among our brethren is that Jesus would build or found the church upon the fact which Peter just confessed - that He is the Son of God. Another reasonable explanation is that Peter is typical of any believer who would come to Christ and upon such confessors the Lord would build or base His church.⁷ In either case, the church would be founded upon the confession of His divine Sonship - powerful and convincing proof that anyone wishing to enter His church and be saved from sin must confess with their mouth the Lord Jesus as being the Son of God (Rom 10:9-10).

SUMMARY

While it is true enough that we must confess Jesus’ Lordship (Phil 2:11), no one can successfully deny that when men confess His divine Sonship, they are at the same time declaring and professing His Lordship. But this is not always the case the other way around as we have seen in the case of “Jehovah’s Witnesses” who are willing to confess the Lordship of Jesus, but not His divine Sonship.

⁷ cf. Milton Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics, Zondervan, 1974, pp. 228-229. This explanation, while reasonable, at the same time rejects the false theory of the Catholic Church that Jesus was declaring Peter to be the first Pope and head of the church.

For salvation men must believe that Jesus is the great “I AM” (Jn 8:24) equal with His father (Jn 1:1; 10:30). On this the church is founded (Mt 16:16-18). And without revealing this to the preacher the sinner has no right to be baptized for the remission of sins (Mk 16:16; Acts 8:36-37; 1 Cor 2:11; Rom 10:9-10). Confession is therefore both (1) necessary and (2) must contain a declaration concerning Jesus’ divine Sonship.

Consider again all who confessed the Lord’s Sonship and all the occasions it was spoken on: demons, the disciples, Nathaniel, Martha, John the baptizer, God the Father, Jesus Himself, the four gospel writers, the apostle Paul in his very first sermon, the young preacher Timothy, the soldier at the foot of the cross, the Hebrews, and Peter. Every one of these confessions were in regards to Jesus’ Sonship. Can we possibly conclude that any confession less than this will suffice? It is called the “good confession” and it encompasses both Jesus’ Lordship and deity.

My conclusion is therefore that confession is both (1) necessary and (2) must contain a declaration concerning Jesus’ divine Sonship.